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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of child abuse. The analysis begins by explaining the problems evident in defining child abuse, and presents the historical development of child abuse prevention. A theoretical discussion on personality development is also included. The second section of the paper describes results of a research project designed to measure the self-concept of 15 children who had been physically abused. Children who had lower average self-concept scores were those with severe injuries as compared to those who were moderately or mildly injured. Younger children had the lowest scores. (Author/MP)

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SOME CHARACTERISTICS AND PERSONALITY PROBLEMS OF CHILDREN WHO ARE VICTIMS OF CHILD ABUSE

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Abstract

This paper further explores the concept of child abuse. The analysis begins by explaining the problems in defining child abuse, and presents the historical development of its prevention. A theoretical discussion on personality development is also included. The second section of the paper describes results of a research project designed to measure the self concept of 15 children who have been physically abused. Children who had lower average self concept scores were those with severe injuries as compared to those who were moderately or mildly injured. Younger children had the lowest scores.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS AND PERSONALITY PROBLEMS OF CHILDREN WHO ARE VICTIMS OF CHILD ABUSE

Defining Child Abuse

As researchers, theorists, and practitioners will agree, the defining of child abuse is not easy. The medical profession is concerned with the physical and emotional state of the parents and children. The legal profession places the emphasis on the abuser (Holmes, et al., 1975).

The concept has had a wide variety of definitions applied to it, ranging from an occurrence where parent or caretaker physically injures a child under eighteen years of age intentionally (Gil, 1970); to "failure to thrive" (Bullard, et al., 1967; Morris, et al., 1964); to child theft, abandonment, or emotional mistreatment (Gelles, 1975).

Child abuse can also include a wide range of activities such as improper clothing, feeding, or caring for a child (Young, 1964).

The most widely used definition is the one developed by Dr. Henry C. Kempe (1962). Kempe coined the term "battered child syndrome" which is limited to a clinical condition, typically broken bones, and physical trauma, which is determined by X-ray.

Therefore, a major problem in the area of child abuse is that of defining the situation. A consequent problem which arises is that it is impossible to compare the abundant data that have been gathered on abuse because of the idosyncratic and varying definitions of child abuse (Gelles, 1975).

History and Statistics of Child Abuse

In the past, child abuse was a way of life, rather than the exception (DeMause, 1975). It was not until the last half of the nineteenth century that the public became aware of child abuse with the idea of stopping such behavior (Zalba, 1966). In 1866, a notorious case of child abuse centered on a ten-year-old child, Mary Ellen Wilson, who had been seriously assaulted by her foster mother. She was found chained to a bed and beaten. The case was brought to the attention of Henry Bergh--founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. A court order was obtained to remove Mary Ellen from her home. At that time there were no laws protecting children against such mistreatment. When the case was brought to trial, the lawyer used as his defense the cruelty of animals laws by stating that humans are members of the animal kingdom and deserving of the laws' protection (Doris, 1974).

In 1874, the first Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was organized in the United States. The major concern of the protective service at that time was with the prosecution and punishment of parents physically mistreating their children and inflicting bodily injury on them (Zalba, 1966). Interest in the abuse of children has developed from punishment of the abuser to treatment for the abuser, and now is shifting to treatment and help for the child.

Child abuse as a concept is relatively new; however, children have been physically abused and even murdered since recorded time (Floyd, 1975). The further back in the history of the study of child rearing practices, the more likely we are to find that children were physically mistreated, abandoned, sexually abused, and even killed. This treatment began at infancy and continued through the childhood period (DeMause, 1975).

Infanticide has commonly occurred throughout history. The reasons were generally based on economic factors, such as limiting family size and relieving financial burdens. Children were slain, abandoned or sold by parents unable or unwilling to support them. Up until the twentieth century, children were considered the property of their parents, who had the freedom to treat them as the parents pleased (U.S. Dept. of H.E.W., 1976). Even today, the physical mistreatment of children is relatively common.

Kempe (1971) estimated that child abuse may occur as often as six times for every 1,000 births. Zalba (1971) conservatively estimated that there are at least 30,000 children abused in the United States each year. Gil and Noble (1967) asserted that reported cases in this country are only a fraction of the actual number, which they estimated at between 2.5 and 4.1 million per year. In 1973, Ray Helfer estimated the reporting rate of more than 70,000 for the year. Despite the contradictions these various estimates present, it is obvious that tens of thousands of children in this country are victims of abuse each year.

Personality Development Related to Child Abuse

In reviewing literature on child abuse it seems that researchers have focused more on the act of child abuse itself and the abusing parent rather than the effects of the abuse on the personality development of the child.

An individual's overall personality develops as he matures and learns about his environment and himself. The way in which children are treated by their parents is the most important factor in determining their perception of themselves (Wylie, 1974).

In order for a child to establish a positive self concept, he must develop a "clear and definite idea of himself, that he is a distinct individual, important because he is a person" (Smart and Smart, 1975, p. 235).

According to most theorists, social interactions are of crucial importance in the formation of an individual's self concept.

> While the contribution of organic sensations and direct body awareness ought not to be ignored, a concept of self can scarcely be developed without adequate interpersonal relations (Yamamoto, 1972, p. 3).

The child becomes aware of the other people in his environment, and through this awareness develops his perception of himself. In a Massachusetts study the children were found to be generally physically normal, but all had seriously impaired relationships with the abusive parents. The children tended to overact to hostility, and were depressive, hyperactive, destructive, and fearful (Bryant, et al., 1963).

Only about 10 per cent of all battered children develop normally, 40 per cent are emotionally disturbed and about 50 per cent are mentally retarded to some degree. They are usually deficient in physical growth, intellectual stimulation, and emotional support (Pipes, 1973).

Various treatment modalities including individual, family, and parental groups are employed to help improve parental role functioning. Education concerning child development and child rearing practices is geared toward the parents in hope of making the family unit a safe place for children's growth and development.

Abuse, like other behavior, becomes habitual. Children learn from the behavior they witness and they internalize conceptions of themselves communicated to them by others (Zalba, 1974). This growth, experience, and the way in which people respond to children affects their self concept (Gordon, 1960). Long before children are able to reason things out, they are "aware and sensitive to the feelings that exist all around them" (Gordon, 1960, p. 9). Conditions leading to a high self concept are

"acceptance of the child, well-defined limits and values, and respect for the child's decision making within those limits" (Smart and Smart, 1975, p. 234). The authors contend that these conditions are often found lacking in the families of abused children. Family disorganization perpetuates a circle of rejection by others, of oneself, and of others. Children in these family situations do not have clear models readily available to guide them in becoming healthy beings (Yamamoto, 1972).

The most frequently discussed social structural theory of family violence is that of the socialization of aggression (Lystad, 1975). The theory states that parents who punish severely produce children who are more aggressive, and they in turn tend to punish their children more severely. This theory is documented in the study of child abuse which reveals that the abused child often becomes the abusing parent (Holmes, et al., 1975).

Straus' (1971) studies have supported a "linkage theory" explanation of the use of physical punishment. This theory holds that

> the use of physical punishment by parents is influenced by the parents' conception of the roles the child is to play as an adult. If the child is expected to become an aggressive, competitive adult, to be upwardly mobile, he is encouraged to be aggressive, to win as a child, and he is not punished for aggressive behavior (Lystad, 1975, p. 330).

Elizabeth Elmer (1963) researched the psychosocial factors in child battering at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. She found that battering parents had feelings of worthlessness which were related to very early personality damage and to a sense of not having been taken care of by their own mothers. Elmer reported that the experiences of early and repeated physical pain made young children subserviant to the environment and led to a storage of aggressive feelings, frequently marked by passivity and a conviction that they were helpless in the face of life's demands.

The result of this experience in an unfavorable family environment could result in a dependent, unstable, delinquent adult who will be a poor parent generating a chain of destructive parenting (Zalba, 1974).

The less affection or warmth children receive (1) the less developed are their subsequent personalities and the less quickly they mature, and (2) the less strength of character and sense of self they are likely to have which may lead to the development of a personality that feels no responsibility to others. Research by Zalba (1967) indicates that the unloved child tends to develop into an unloving adult, with a high degree of self-hatred.

As individuals the children are, of course, different, but as victims of abuse they also conform to certain patterns. More than anything else they are searchers--searchers for strength, love, affection, and security. In that search, they may be appeasing or defiant, withdrawn or belligerent, sullen or flippant. They may have dreams, but these do not build self-confidence (Young, 1964).

In a study conducted by Richard Rolston (1971), the abused child was rated as being more "callous" and "somber" than his non-abused counterpart. Often the child will substitute dreams for reality and live on fantasy (Hansen, 1973), or a child may even block the incident out of his mind in order to forget about it (Pipes, 1973).

There is evidence that the use of punishment, especially physical punishment, tends to produce a child who is relatively low in internalized moral standards and self-directedness (Straus, 1974).

Theoretically, children who are abused have an unusual degree of hostility towards parents and the world in general (Curtis, 1963). Many studies, although not unanimous, showed that children who received severe

punishment from parents exhibited more overt aggressive behavior (Straus, 1974).

Apart from physical injury, the existence of a high level of physical violence has a major influence on all phases of personality development, including such characteristics as aggression, anxiety, and guilt (Steinmetz and Straus, 1974; Becker, 1964; Parke, 1970, 1972).

Studies have shown that parents' use of physical punishment to control the aggressiveness of their children is probably increasing rather than decreasing the aggressive tendencies of their children (Bandura, 1973; Eron, et al., 1971; Sears, et al., 1957). Research has shown that violence begets violence (Straus, et al., 1976).

Not all groups in our society socialize children to the same degree by means of violent behavior. Gelles (1973) and Gil (1970) found a high incidence of violence against children among families with lower educational achievements and lower socioeconomic status, and among families with four or more children. Eron (1963) on the contrary, did not find class differences. Eron also cited evidence that parents with fewer mobility aspirations for their children socialized them more aggressively.

Reliable data on socioeconomic differences are difficult to obtain, because, as a number of studies have pointed out, upperclass persons are able to get help from private doctors who are sometimes willing to let the abuse go unreported, while lowerclass persons must go to the public hospital, which is required to make a report (Coffey, et al., 1972).

Children are the future of the world. Their emotional status will affect their values, goals, and decisions which will affect the world and everyone in it. There is a need for evaluating the feelings, responses, and development of abused children. Equally important is the need for research

in the area of personality development of the victims of child abuse to contribute to the existing knowledge and understanding necessary to insure that these children will grow into happy, secure individuals.

Self Concept of Abused Children Studied

The overall purpose of this phase of the paper is to describe the self concept of children who have been physically abused. In this study, child abuse was defined as the physical assault by an adult on a child which has been called to the attention of the Child Protection Center. There were three levels of abuse observed by the center: (1) severely injured, which is the presence of multiple fractures, massive bruises or burns, both old and new injuries; (2) moderately injured is single fractures and/or numerous bruises on small areas of the body, and (3) mildly injured is the presence of a few burns and/or bruises (National Statistics of Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting, 1975).

The operational definition of self concept was the feelings and reactions a child had in regard to himself as measured by a self concept scale.

METHOD

Sample

The sample consisted of 15 children, ranging in the age from 3 to 11. The age category was further subdivided to include: 6 children who were 6 to 7 years old, 4 who were 3 to 5 years old, and 5 between 8 and 11. Forty percent of the abused children were mildly injured, 33.3% moderately in injured and 26.7% were severely injured. There were eight boys and seven girls; 5 black and 10 white abused children. The names of children who had been physically abused were secured from the Child Protection Center. The social caseworker of each family obtained initial verbal and written consent from a parent or the legal guardian for each child to participate in the

study. The questionnaires were administered in the homes. Information on parents consisted of eight couples and seven single parent families, ranging in ages from 26 to 37 years for males and 23 to 40 years for females. The educational level ranged from 8 to 14 years for males and 10 to 16 years for females, and income from $2,000 to $19,000.

Measures

The instrument used to determine self-concept consisted of selected items from the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale (The Way I Feel About Myself) (Piers-Harris, 1969). The scale was designed primarily for research development of children's self attitudes and their own perception of themselves. The entire test consisted of 80 items which could be divided into 6 factor scores: Behavior, Intellectual and School Status, Physical Appearances and Attributes, Anxiety, Popularity, and Happiness and Satisfaction. Only the factors of Behavior, Anxiety, and Happiness and Satisfaction were used in the study because the ages of children were too young to answer questions concerning the other three factors. The test is a quickly completed self report instrument designed for children over a wide range Piers and Harris believe that there are many variables which affect a positive or negative self concept. They state:

> It is assumed that parental child-rearing attitudes and practices have a considerable influence. Since these are difficult to assess objectively, we typically must rely on parental statements concerning them, or on what seems even more important for self concept, the child's perception of the parental attitudes and practices (Piers-Harris, 1969, p. 15).

The items were developed from a collection of children's statements about what they liked and disliked about themselves from A.T. Jersild's, In Search of Self, 1952, and written as simple declarative statements (Piers-Harris, 1969).

Approximately half of the items are worded to indicate a positive self concept and the other items to indicate a negative self concept. However, negative terms such as "don't" were avoided to reduce confusion for young children.

The scale was standardized on 1,183 children grades 4 to 12 in a Pennsylvania school district. There appeared to be no consistent sex or grade difference in means. The scale possessed sufficient reliability and validity to be used in research. The pilot study also established that the children understood the items. On an individual basis and when read aloud, the test can be used on children below the 4th grade. The scale was judged to have good internal consistency and adequate temporal stability (Piers-Harris, 1969).

Findings and Analysis

A manual available with the Piers-Harris Scale was used to score the responses. A total raw self concept score was obtained for each respondent.

One (1) point was given for every correct answer and zero (0) points for every incorrect answer as determined by the available key which accompanied the test. The total raw score was then divided into three categories: A Behavior Score, An Anxiety Score, and a Happiness and Satisfaction Score. The higher the score, the more positive self concept for the child. A high score on Factor 1 (Behavior) indicates a positive self concept with respect to behavior. A high score on Factor 2 (Anxiety) indicates that the respondent describes himself as low in anxiety and a high self concept. A high score on Factor 3 (Happiness and Satisfaction), indicates a positive self concept in regard to the individual's personal happiness and satisfaction.

Means and frequencies were obtained for each respondent. The possible overall raw self concept scores ranged from 1 to 30. The sample range was

from 7 to 24, with slightly over half of the children scoring less than the mean of 17.2. Agewise, the scores for the 6 to 7 age group had the highest self concept score average 20.8; the 3 to 5 age group was 12.3 which was the lowest; and the 8 to 11 age group was 16.3. The average score for male children (18.3) was higher than female children (16). The possible range for the Behavior Variable was 1 to 15 with 53% of the children scoring above the mean score of 8.6. As to anxiety, a little over half of the children had scores lower than the mean of 4.3 out of the possible 1 to 8 range. This same pattern was repeated with the Happiness and Satisfaction Factor. Eight of the children had less than the mean score (4.3) from a range of 1 to 7.

The abused children who were severely injured (26.7%) had the lowest self concept score average (14.8), those who were mildly injured (40%) had an average score of 15.8, and the children who were moderately injured (33.3%) had the highest self concept score average of 20.8. The most frequent abuser in the study was the male parent (53.3%), however, those children who were abused by the female parent (40%) had a lower average self concept (14.3).

In families who had an income of less than $6,000 the children had a lower average self concept score than those children whose family income was greater than $8,000.

Discussion

The review of literature has shown that the personality development of children may be affected by physical abuse. Children in this type of family environment may develop a low or negative self concept. Family disorganization has perpetuated the vicious circle of rejection by others, of oneself, and of others (Yamamoto, 1972).

The results shown from the data in this article indicated that 53.3% of the abused children in the sample had a self concept below the 17.2 mean. It is understandable that the children who were severely abused and the children who were younger had the lowest self concepts.

As has been shown, abused children generally become abusing parents. This could be because the model present for them to learn about parenting is abuse, and the children learn what they experience.

This type of family environment influences the socialization of aggression, in which children learn aggressive behavior from the aggressive parent or caretaker. Society also influences this socialization by the culturally sanctioned norms allowing and even encouraging aggressive child-rearing practices. Under these conditions, it is obvious that incidents of physical abuse are bound to happen.

The perpetrators of abuse are the parents, permanent or temporary parent substitutes, or others living in a child's home regularly or temporarily The abuse may be intentional and conscious or unintentional and unconscious. It may result from disciplinary actions or negative and hostile feelings toward children. Abusive acts in the home may be one-time events, occasional incidents, or regular patterns.

There is need for study of the changes in relationships between individuals. Of particular importance is the child-rearing function in our society: how one cares for the child, attends to his physical needs, socializes him, teaches him, and loves the child.

While it is relatively easy to obtain basic demographic data on families, especially those who are not functioning well and are being seen by public agencies which collect records, it is not easy to obtain data on the interpersonal relationships, attitudes, and values. Due to the

controversies surrounding this subject and the various definitions, careful attention must be made concerning sample selection.

The authors do realize that the size of the sample is such that generalizations in regard to the larger populations cannot be made. Perhaps a larger sample size would determine whether significant statistical differences exist between such dependent variables as self concept and independent variables of age, sex, educational level, income, marital status, etc. However, even with such a sample, certain conclusions can be drawn concerning the self concept and overall personality development of abused children. It is obvious that in order for these children to develop into happy, healthy human beings, they must also develop a positive self concept. It is within the family that the child's capacity to grow and develop is nurtured. And it is here that the child learns future adult roles of violent or non-violent character.

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